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THE DOLL

BY MURIEL HARRIS

THE doll is a sardonic creature. We know her age to be at least four thousand years and the perfection of the Egyptian dolls of that period makes it certain that her ancestry is considerably more remote than this. Yet she remains unchanged and unchanging, throughout history, nursing our delusions, giving us away without scruple, a silent witness to our emotions and our needs, to the futility of all our efforts to present ourselves as other than we are, to the devastating truth that there is no real dividing line between mortals and Olympians, even between children and grown-ups.

By dolls, I mean those toys that are usually given to children to play with. The religious element does not come in here, or when it does, the doll ceases to be a doll proper. The figurines, for instance, placed in Egyptian tombs for religious purposes, are not dolls at all, though they can easily be mistaken for the real dolls found in children's tombs, but with entirely different functions. Sometimes the two functions are interchangeable. In the Brooklyn Museum, for instance, the magnificent collection from New Mexico shows the doll used primarily for religious purposes. When it has served this purpose, it is made over to the child, and from that moment becomes a doll proper. Similarly in the fourteenth century, royalties used to send each other dolls, primarily to exhibit upon them the latest fashion. Later these fashion dolls were given to the children and so started upon their legitimate career. It is the real dolls, the dolls given to children, who really preserve continuity of history and who really give us those unexpected glimpses into a mirror, whose reflection of ourselves is so different from that upon which we have counted.

Perhaps the most unexpected truth brought home to us by dolls of all the ages, is that they are by no means the

monopoly of the child. There are children's dolls and there are Olympians' dolls and there are very many more of the latter than of the former. The child's doll may be a piece of stick wrapped in a duster, but endowed with a soul, which, in later years cannot be recaptured. It may be a melancholy wreck, vivified by tenderness into all that is bright and beautiful, and, above all, indispensable. You simply cannot classify the true child's doll, because most of it is imagination and so you never know what form it will take.

The Olympians' doll, on the other hand, is usually wholly lacking in imagination, but its exterior qualities are unmistakable. It may walk or talk, be beautifully dressed, be as natural as a child, possess wardrobes and nurseries, repeat, in short, everything that the Olympian most appreciates himself. As far as material goes, the Olympian's doll wins, hands down. But whereas the child knows exactly what it wants, the Olympian very rarely knows. He believes, for instance, that all the trouble he has lavished upon his dolls is for the sake of the child and not for himself. Now it is true that some children like the dolls of some Olympians, but it is hardly ever for the qualities upon which the Olympian has laid special stress. Moreover, the Olympian gets pleasure out of the fashioning or planning of his doll, which is far greater than anything experienced by the child when it comes into its possession. But still the convention goes on and the fiction is thus maintained that children and parents are two wholly different sets of human beings. And the doll is testimony that so it has been for four thousand years and so it will be probably for four thousand years more.

Another fraud, which most of us like to perpetrate upon ourselves, is ruthlessly exposed by the silent witness. I mean the fraud of modernness. Not so very many years ago a Paris doll was a conception which never failed to give its thrill. Latterly Paris dolls have been exchanged for teddy bears or still more modern presentments of the doll, and it all feels very new and advanced and modern and revolutionary of the old educational ideas. Turning to the Egyptians, however, we find in their dolls the very Parisians of the ancient world, Parisians perhaps who gossiped about modern architectural tendencies when Cheops was building his pyramid, and discussed the domestic affairs of the Shepherd Kings. The Egyptian dolls are wonderfully

smart, whether they are made of flat gaily painted pieces of wood or modelled in earthenware or stone. They are slim, elegant, spare—certainly witty, rather sensitive to the classical influence though they might not have recognized Greek art under so dead-and-buried a term. Like the Parisians, there was little they did not understand about color, and like them also they had a taste for embroidery, decoration and a touch of the ouija board. Many of the little painted dolls are decorated with triangles and cabalistic signs, to say nothing of lucky pigs of naturalistic design. And very much care is lavished upon them. Parent and child had much in common over these dolls. Many of them are jointed—and the Parisian has always laid great stress upon jointing. The hair convention of four thousand years ago is one which still exists in Lower Abyssinia today. Mud pellets from the Nile are threaded upon strings to form hyacinthine locks, barbered according to the rigid Egyptian style. Thus there are few principles in dolls today which were not anticipated by the old Egyptian, and those that were not, appear among the Greeks and Romans.

Since we have made our own so many Greek and Roman conventions, it is almost difficult to realize that these conventions—many of them—existed at least two thousand five hundred years ago. The wax doll, for instance, came not from Paris, but from Greece in the first instance. And just as the Pompeiian hot air system is a little nonplussing to the modern engineer who has discovered everything, so a doll's bedstead in classical times makes us feel almost that the ancients must have been human beings. And when we come to Plutarch's little girl who asked her nurse to give food to her dolls, what becomes of the historical period, of dates and modern methods and discoveries?

The Greek dolls were often so beautiful as really to be little less than statuettes, while the Romans extended the life of the doll to a remarkable point of realism. She, too, had her wardrobes, her doll's houses with complete sets of household utensils usually made of lead. Even the money-box was not lacking, made of clay and with little slits for the cents and dimes of the day. The discovery some years ago of the tomb of little Crepercia Tryphania disclosed a beautiful wooden doll, nearly a foot high, showing traces of gilding and having joints, and another tomb of interest, as linking up ancient with modern life, was that of a child, found in

London, in which was a little doll dating from the earlier years of the Roman occupation of Britain. Finally, to carry realism still further and to show that classicism is no less modern than are our own times, there is in the British Museum a sad, small rag doll, which belonged to a little Roman some seventeen hundred years ago. There is one blue bead on the left of its battered head,—presumably, as to-day in Italy, to ward off the evil eye. Even the idea of something soft for tender fingers is not new—indeed, perhaps, considerations of hygiene alone are absent, which temporarily are laying the rag-doll under suspicion.

While dolls show the extension of the anthropomorphic idea to all parts of the world, it is even more startling to trace in them with almost equal certainty the psychological development of a race as regards such unprimitive qualities as boredom, humor, exaggeration. The “pretty” doll of our own times has for some time been out of fashion. The golden-haired, blue-eyed beauty has been replaced in one direction by the more natural, realistic doll; in the other by the humorous, absurd, and, very often, vulgar doll. In between you have the teddy bear, who, strictly speaking, is the lineal descendant of the Esquimaux dolls, of which there are several specimens in the Natural History Museum. Now it is, of course, easy to grow tired of the merely pretty, and the latter-day Olympian casts around for something to take its place in the doll-world. Thus you have dolls who turn up their eyes, dolls with over-developed stomachs, dolls who wear veils and little else besides, dolls who grin and dolls who are merely ugly—as the easiest antithesis to prettiness. Few of them are really humorous; many of them are excessively boring. They are the sign of a self-conscious age, which above all must be different—no matter in what direction, no matter at what sacrifice—but different. But they are not different at all. The Greeks—to take the earliest known freak doll-makers—went through just the same phase. From the exquisite beauties of the age of Pericles, the Greeks turned to caricature and to the sort of humor that used to be considered inherent in any sort of deformity. The dull Bæotian, for instance, offered unrivalled opportunities for caricature of which the Greek doll-maker was not slow to take advantage. Bæotians as dolls are represented with fatuous, goose-like expressions which are really funny. Other “humorous” dolls—the

Golliwogs of ancient Greece—fell back upon humped backs or big paunches, with which to obtain their effect and negroes, thus transformed, are found in large numbers among ancient Greek dolls. Incidentally, the average humorous doll may be found all over the world under the conventional guise of the tilting-toy or Bouncing Billy—that is to say, the doll or figure whose center of gravity is so arranged that, if knocked down, he always gets up again. The Bouncing Billy of Maryland exists in Japan, China, Germany, Spain. He also existed in ancient Rome, where he no doubt fascinated parents and children alike.

In religion, as in every-day government, laws are made and laws are broken, and some laws are taken as being expressly made to be broken. Normally there are forms and observances by means of which laws are broken, and so the really law-abiding citizen can feel that he is on the side of the angels whatever he does. Among dolls you find a similar system, only it is perhaps more straightforwardly systematized. Thus, in the Mohammedan world, you have the story of Mohammed who played at dolls with his nine-year-old wife Ayesha. On the other hand you have the Koran, which, like the Bible, says you must not make graven images. Now a doll is clearly a graven image. Yet dolls are a prime necessity. Mohammedans in Egypt take a very short cut to achieve their object. They make their dolls of white rag, tightly rolled, and they dress them in the conventional black silk attire of the Mohammedan women. But they give them no faces and thus escape the charge of the graven image. This is not unlike the habit of the Sunday doll, who used, unofficially, to exist in England years ago. Since Sunday was a day of rest, you put away all mundane things including dolls. Unfortunately your behavior without your doll was not all that could be desired either from a Sabbatical or a parental point of view. And so there was often a doll, kept in tissue paper in a bottom drawer, who used to be produced for Sundays only, who had to be treated with a care and reverence befitting the day, but who, being surety for a certain alleviation of an intolerably dull time, inspired an affection she otherwise would not have achieved. Even in China, where the Trimetrical Classic—the horn-book of every Chinese school—declares that play is unprofitable, Chinese children manage not only to possess dolls, but to possess some of the most beautiful dolls.

Usually children and Olympians meet in the extremes of the doll-world, except perhaps in Japan, where dolls have Feasts and festivals and are treasured as much by the grown-ups as the children. At one extreme you get the Russian peasant doll, made sometimes of moss, sometimes of chips of wood, brightly painted. They have the sombre, wooden expression of the denizen of boundless forests, reproduced, for instance, in the Byzantine Madonnas—and they have clearly been made solemnly and will be played with solemnly. Few dolls are nearer nature than these and in their presence the boundary line between children and Olympians is simply non-existent. At the other extreme, you get the elaboration which, while it is made over to the children, simply could not have existed without the greatest interest in the subject on the part of the grown-up.

There are very definite periods of this elaboration. In the eighteenth century for instance, children became rather fashionable. I mean fashionable in the sense of being regarded as ornamental assets to the family, instead of being merely the necessary continuation of the race. You have only to look at the Reynolds' portraits of babies to realize the estimation in which they were held and how the child ideal had changed from the stately children of Van Dyck's day. The result was an immense outcrop of dolls with all sorts of refinements and elaborations. Usually, owing to the heavy German fashions, the dolls were made of wood and not very naturalistically painted. Those of wax which survive are most often effigies made of babies after death, just as a wax effigy of Nelson was carried at his funeral. Being babies, they are very often mistaken for dolls, pure and simple. But of clothes they had everything that chintz and brocade could produce. The elders vied with each other in producing Hogarth-like families of dolls, who were housed in beautiful dolls' houses with exquisite suites of Chippendale furniture, the very best china, Sheraton mirrors, blue glass, miniature chandeliers and all the luxuries which are sought after in furnishing to-day. So many of these dolls' houses have come down practically intact, that there is reason for grave doubt as to how much the children were ever allowed to play with them. Similarly the Japanese have the ceremonial dolls, who have very little to do with children, and during the French Renaissance dolls reached such a height of luxury as to make them very much

more the vehicles of Olympian love of showing-off than objects suitable for children. Indeed the tendency of French dolls generally has been over-elaboration, and that, even before the French type emancipated itself from the German influence about the middle of the nineteenth century. Probably it has something to do with the maturity of the French child as compared with those of many other nations. Suffice it that Jean-Jacques Rousseau took upon himself to fulminate against extravagance in dolls, much as people might fulminate against the costliness of lap-dogs to-day, and the extravagance of a doll, for instance, which in the eighteenth century cost 20,000 livres, was clearly an affair of the elders rather than of the children for whom such dolls were ostensibly designed. In early Mexico you find a similar elaboration in Aztec dolls, who, when blown into, said "Mamma." One more instance, and a very modern instance, of the monopoly of the doll by the grown-up can be found in "*ma tante d'Alsace*." "*Ma tante d'Alsace*" is perhaps the one known instance of doll-influence in the art of propaganda. She hails from Brittany. Ever since the war of 1870 a number of Breton families have kept a very beautiful Alsatian doll, wrapt in tissue paper and produced only on ceremonial occasions. She is known to the children of the family as "*ma tante d'Alsace*," and she was used to be a perpetual reminder to Breton youth from its earliest days of the Lost Provinces.

Thus you find all nations leagued to possess dolls. You find all religions overcoming suspicions and beliefs in order to possess them, and that, whether among the early Christians, who would naturally be suspicious of so pagan an institution, or among the Congolese with their iron doll, always a little uncomfortable as to whether it should not be treated as a fetish. You find them descending to little ruses and tricks, in the interest of the doll; you find art and invention placed at her service. You find seasons of the year given over to dolls—when it is right and proper to buy them and possess them. And all the time the doll remains unchanged, unyielding, unwinking, knowing that while she can wait for you four thousand years and more, you cannot do without her.

MURIEL HARRIS.